

Message Text

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PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 OPR-02 A-01 SY-05 MCT-01 /090 W

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FM AMEMBASSY TEHRAN

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6626

INFO AMEMBASSY LONDON

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 TEHRAN 0961

NOFORN

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TAGS: SHUM PINT PINS IR

SUBJ: RELIGION AND POLITICS: QOM AND ITS AFTERMATH

REF A. TEHRAN 0548 B. TEHRAN 0389 C. TEHRAN 0665

D. 77 TEHRAN A-124

SUMMARY: RELIGIOUS DISTURBANCES WIDESPREAD OVER WEEKEND JAN 14-15. AYATOLLAH SHARIATMADARI'S INTERVIEW WITH THREE FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS WAS OPEN (AND UNPRECEDENTED) PUBLIC REFUTATION OF GOVERNMENT STATEMENTS. AS RESULT OF QOM INCIDENT ORGANIZED MOSLEM ESTABLISHMENT POTENTIALLY IN STRONGEST POSITION SINCE 1963 VIS-A-VIS GOI. MOSLEMS FAR FROM WHOLLY UNIFIED, BUT GOI IS DEMONSTRATING CONSIDERABLE UNCERTAINTY IN FACING UP TO THE CHALLENGE. END SUMMARY.

1. FOLLOWING DESCRIPTION OF EVENTS WERE GLEANED FROM IRANIAN CONTACTS CLOSE TO RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND TWO OF THREE FOREIGN JOURNALISTS WHO INTERVIEWED AYATOLLAH SHARIATMADARI AND OTHER RELIGIOUS LEADERS. EMBASSY ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE OF QOM EVENTS AND AFTERMATH GIVEN IN PARAS SIX THRU NINE.

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2. AS FULL REPORTS COME IN, IT APPEARS WEEKEND JAN 14-15 SAW MAJOR RELIGIOUS DEMONSTRATIONS IN MASHAD, ABADAN, AHWAZ, DEZFUL, HORRAMSHAR, SHUSTAR, ZANJAN AND PERHAPS OTHER CITIES. AHWAZ BAZAAR WAS CLOSED FOR TWO DAYS AND 50 CITIZENS WERE REPORTED "EXILED" TO FORCED RESIDENCE IN QOM AS A RESULT OF THEIR PARTICIPATION IN DEMONSTRATIONS.

TIONS. UNCONFIRMED RUMORS INDICATE SEVERAL PEOPLE WERE KILLED IN ABADAN RIOT AND NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS INJURED AT OTHER LOCATIONS. UNCONFIRMED RUMOR IN TEHRAN INDICATES THREE PEOPLE DIED AS RESULT OF INJURIES SUSTAINED AT ARYAMEHR TECHNICAL COLLEGE RIOT JAN 11 AND 12. MANY IRANIANS APPEAR TO HAVE CEASED TO BELIEVE NEWSPAPER REPORTS OF RELIGIOUS INCIDENTS AND REGARD COUNTER-DEMONSTRATIONS (REPORTED REF A AND C) AS GOVERNMENT INSPIRED.

3. JOURNALISTS WHO INTERVIEWED AYATOLLAH SHARIATMADARI IMPRESSED WITH HIS SINCERITY. AYATOLLAH WAS UNWILLING TO BE INTERVIEWED FOR PUBLICATION BUT WAS FINALLY CONVINCED HIS STATEMENTS WOULD BE MUCH LESS MEANINGFUL IF HIS NAME WERE NOT ATTACHED TO THEM. SHARIATMADARI CONTINUALLY STRESSED DESIRE NOT TO ENTER INTO CONFLICT WITH CIVIL AUTHORITIES. HE SAID HE HAD NOT ORDERED BAZAARS IN COUNTRY TO CLOSE DOWN AND HAD ENCOURAGED RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN EACH TOWN TO MAKE THEIR OWN DECISION REGARDING MEMORIAL SERVICES FOR THOSE KILLED IN QOM. NEVERTHELESS, SHARIATMADARI'S STATEMENTS IN BRANIGIN WASHPOST STORIES (JAN 20, USINFO) WERE A DIRECT CHALLENGE TO GOVERNMENT'S VERSION OF EVIDENCE SURROUNDING KILLINGS AT QOM.

4. AYATOLLAH SHARIATMADARI WAS TREATED WITH OBVIOUS
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RESPECT BY OTHER LEADERS OF QOM THEOLOGICAL INSTITUTE WHO WERE PRESENT DURING INTERVIEW. RELIGIOUS LEADERS AGREED POLICE HAD OVERREACTED AND INSISTED SHOOTINGS WERE UNPROVOKED. AYATOLLAH ASKED QUESTION (NOT REPORTED BY NEWSMEN) WHY POLICE HAD NOT USED TEAR GAS OR FIRE HOSES? SHARIATMADARI AND HIS COLLEAGUES SAID ORIGINAL CROWD HAD BEEN AROUND 5000. HE SAID SOME 30 INDIVIDUALS WERE KILLED WHEN SHOOTING STARTED--MORE DIED LATER BRINGING TOTAL AROUND 70. (COMMENT: EMBASSY HAS RECEIVED REPORT THAT PARS NEWS AGENCY, AFTER FIRST REPORTS, CAME UP WITH FIGURE OF 76 KILLED BUT WAS ORDERED BY GOI NOT TO USE THIS FIGURE. MORE ACCURATE FIGURE IN OUR JUDGEMENT IS REPORT FROM OPPOSITION INFORMANT WHO CLAIMS THAT 14 DEATH CERTIFICATES WERE KNOWN TO HAVE BEEN SIGNED (SEP MEMCON). THE LATTER TRACKS WITH OTHER RELIABLE REPORTS EMBASSY HAS RECEIVED.)

5. IN DISCUSSIONS WITH REPORTERS, SHARIATMADARI INDICATED RELIGIOUS COLLEGE AND MOSQUE AT AHWAZ HAD BEEN CLOSED FIVE DAYS BECAUSE RELIGIOUS LEADERS THERE HAD BEEN IN FOREFRONT OF DEMONSTRATORS. SHARIATMADARI AND HIS COLLEAGUES LEFT DEFINITE IMPRESSION WITH JOURNALISTS

THAT THEY HAD CONTACTS IN MOST MAJOR AND MANY MINOR
IRANIAN CITIES. TWO MULLAHS WHO HAD RECENTLY RETURNED
FROM KHUZISTAN PROVINCE TOLD OF THEIR ORGANIZATIONAL
EFFORTS THERE. JOURNALIST' IMPRESSION WAS THAT

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SHARIATMADARI WAS EMERGING AS FOREMOST LEADER OF MOSLEM
REACTION TO GOVERNMENT. OTHER EMBASSY SOURCES DESCRIBE
HIM AS ONE OF EIGHT LEADING IRANIAN AYATOLLAHS AND
POSSIBLY THE MOST EMINENT ONE, AFTER JAILING OF AYATOLLAH
TALEQUANI AND BANISHMENT TO PROVINCES OF SEVERAL OTHERS
LAST FALL. ONE SOURCE NOTED THERE WAS NOW NO RPT NO
AYATOLLAH IN MASHAD, ONE OF IRN'S THREE MOST RELIGIOUS
CITIES. ACCORDING TO EMBASSY FILES, AYATOLLAH
SHARIATMADARI HAD BEEN KNOWN IN EARLIER YEARS AS
PROGRESSIVE THINKER (IN MOSLEM CONTEXT), ONE WHO HAD
SERIOUSLY STUDIED ISLAMIC REFORMERS OF LATE 19TH AND
EARLY 20TH CENTURY. JOURANLISTS WERE INTRODUCED TO
AYATOLLAH BY SENIOR FIGURE IN TEHRAN'S "HOSSEYNIYEH
ERSHAD" RELIGIOUS CENTER WHICH MAINTAINS CONTACTS WITH
SHARIATMADARI AND OTHER AYATOLLAHS.

6. EMBASSY ANLAYSIS: FROM POLITICAL STANDPOINT, MOST
INTERESTING ELEMENT OF SHARIATMADARI'S PRONOUNCEMENTS WAS
STATEMENT THAT WEARING OF VEIL WAS UP TO INDIVIDUAL
WOMAN AND THAT ISLAM WAS NOT AGAINST LAND REFORM BUT
MERELY AGAINST WAY GOVERNMENT HAD CARRIED OUT CERTAIN
ELEMENTS OF SHAH-PEOPLE REVOLUTION. TWO LOCAL CONTACTS
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WHO ARE FAMILIAR WITH RELIGIOUS CURRENTS HERE BELIEVE IF SHARIATMADARI CAN MAKE THIS POSITION MAIN THESIS OF ISLAMIC OPPOSITIONISTS (MANY OF WHOM ARE MUCH MORE REACTIONARY THAN THIS) HE WILL HAVE TURNED MOVEMENT IN DIRECTION WHICH MIGHT COMMEND IT TO THOSE WHO HAVE THUS FAR BEEN ALIENATED FROM OPPOSITION POLITICS BUT WHO ARE ALSO NOT INTERESTED IN RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM--MEMBERS OF IRAN'S EMERGING MIDDLE CLASS.

7. IN COMING MONTHS EMBASSY WILL BE ATTEMPTING TO WORK AT INHERENTLY DIFFICULT TASK OF LEARNING MORE ABOUT RELIGIOUS ELEMENTS OF OPPOSITIONIST MOVEMENT, INCLUDING DOCTRINES WHICH ARE CURRENTLY BEING ESPOUSED BY BOTH PROGRESSIVES AND REACTIONARIES. WHAT QOM INCIDENT AND ITS AFTERMATH HAS DONE, HOWEVER, IS TO ELEVATE RELIGIOUS OPPOSITION TO MORE VISIBLE, SIGNIFICANT POSITION AMONG THOSE WHO HAVE THUS FAR TAKEN ADVANTAGE OF NEW LIBERALIZATION. ORGANIZATIONAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF AYATOLLAHS AND MULLAHS IN RESPONSE TO QOM EVENTS SEEM IMPRESSIVE, THOUGH THEY WOULD PROBABLY FIND IT DIFFICULT TO GENERATE ADDITIONAL DEMONSTRATIONS IMMEDIATELY FOR PURELY POLITICAL PURPOSES IN ABSENCE OF ADDITIONAL CRYSTALLIZING INCIDENTS. (QOM DEMONSTRATION WAS TOUCHED OFF BY ARTICLE IN DAILY NEWSPAPER ETELAAT WHICH SEVERELY ATTACKED EXILED RELIGIOUS LEADER KHOMEINI.) FOR EXAMPLE IT IS DOUBTFUL THAT RELIGIOUS FACTIONS COULD BE MOBILIZED IN NEAR FUTURE TO SUPPORT ANY LEGISLATION IN PARLIAMENT OR TO DEMONSTRATE IN FAVOR OF CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM. POTENTIAL BLEND OF RELIGIOUS FERVOR WITH THE POLITICAL, HOWEVER, HAS KEPT GOI, AND SHAH, ALERT TO DANGERS OF RELIGIOUS INVOLVEMENT IN POLITICS.

8. INITIAL SOUNDINGS INDICATE THAT GOI HAS NOT RPT NOT
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BEEN ABLE TO MOBILIZE MIDDLE CLASS AROUND SLOGANS DEPICTING RELIGIOUS DEMONSTRATORS AT QOM AS HOPELESS REACTIONARIES. "WORKERS AND PEASANTS" PLUS BUSINESSMEN, GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, STUDENTS AND SOME INTELLECTUALS HAVE TURNED OUT DUTIFULLY FOR GOVERNMENT DEMONSTRATIONS, BUT THIS HAS NOT BOUND MIDDLE CLASS MORE CLOSELY TO GOVERNMENT. POTENTIAL DANGER, OF COURSE, IS THAT GOI MIGHT LOSE CONTROL OVER RELIGIOUS ELEMENTS, LEADING TO THE INHERENTLY MORE DANGEROUS CONFRONTATION OF SECULAR MODERNIZERS AGAINST FUNDAMENTALIST RELIGIOUS LEADERS

WHICH HAS BEEN AVOIDED FOR SOME 15 YEARS.

9. THUS FAR, AMERICANS AND OTHER FOREIGNERS HAVE NOT
RPT NOT BEEN INCLUDED EVEN INDIRECTLY IN ATTACKS ON GOI.
GIVEN DEEP XENOPHOBIC STREAK IN FUNDAMENTALIST MOSLEMS,
HOWEVER, IT IS DIFFICULT TO SEE HOW THIS CONDITION CAN
HOLD UNLESS PROGRESSIVE AYATOLLAHS ARE ABLE TO IMPOSE
MORE STRICT DISCIPLINE ON THEIR FOLLOWERS THAN SEEMS
POSSIBLE FROM PAST EXPERIENCE, PARTICULARLY IF ISLAMIC
MARXISTS MUDDY THE WATERS.
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